THE DUPING RACKET

by Brooks Kohler

The brown brick building standing before Barry blended in with the other firetraps of the city. A former apartment building long abandoning its purpose, it was now home to a videocassette pirate named Woodson who used the lower floor for his operation and the upper floors for storage.

Barry knew nothing about VHS piracy, but he knew how to hotwire a car and disable a burglar alarm. So, when word got around to him Woodson needed an electronically inclined criminal to help him with his operation, Barry applied by stealing Woodson's car and holding it for ransom. The stunt infuriated Woodson who after three days cornered Barry with a pistol. As the young man plead for his life in a damp alley wreaking of dumpster rot, Woodsman began to lower the gun as Barry explained he took the car as a way to get in on the duping operation. Woodson admired the stunt, patted Barry's cheek, and ended the interview by wedging the business end of the pistol between Barry's nose and cheek.

"You came close to dyin', kid," said Woodson. "Next time, you will."

Woodson had a good thing going, but success brought heat. On more than one occasion he became paranoid of a raid and closed down shop. When he did this, he took long trips leaving Barry free to roam the alleys of the city in search of a dishonest dollar. But when Woodson returned, he always came back with bigger dreams and wild schemes. It kept Barry hooked like a fish on an unbreakable line.

So, when Woodson came back from one of his fantastical journeys

with a moving truck full of VHS cassettes of the adult variety, Barry was needless to say, intrigued.

As they unloaded the truck and carried the boxes upstairs to storage Barry asked, “Where’d you get these?”

Woodson grinned and replied, “A friend.”

Barry had reason for concern. Adult movies were the prize possession of organized crime, but he also knew Woodson dealt with persons allegedly connected and knowing how much Woodson feared the cops, he surely feared the mob more. So, Barry pushed his worry to the side figuring Woodson scored a legal steal.

Weeks passed without any intrusions – the duping operation running like a well oiled clock.

The dupes were selling in stores all over the city and some out of state.

With the added exposure, Woodson’s anxiety began to build. He suspected a raid any day, and Barry began to smell the tension on Woodson’s breath.

“I’m outta here,” said Woodson. “Not sure when I’ll be back.”

Before leaving, Woodson ordered Barry to lay low for week, and if nothing happened to return on a specified date. He had some guys coming to clean out the storage rooms and agreed to pay Barry for helping them.

Barry knew it was the end of the line for his partnership with Woodson. A gentle, friendly slap to the cheek of Barry’s face and Woodson saying, “We had a good run, kid,” – said it all.

A week passed with no raid.

Barry arrived at the duping operation to find a large moving van parked near the entrance.

Two men stood out front smoking cigarettes, greeted him, and Barry unlocked the doors.

It took a good portion of the day to get the boxes packed up. The climbing of the stares tired the three, by late afternoon they managed to get it all cleared out.

Then it happened.

As Barry moved to lock the door of the duping lab, he heard a snap. Turning, he noticed one of the men fidgeting with a pistol as the other came around to finish the botched job.

Barry opened the door to the building and slammed it shut. He tried to lock it, but the men muscled in.

Stumbling back, Barry raced to Woodson's desk hoping the stashed revolver was there. It was, and he grabbed it.

As the men fired at him, Barry hurried up the stairs to the storage rooms. He had no idea how to get out of the jam, but his feet worked like an engine carrying him along. Before he knew it, he was near the back of a dark room crouched down behind some empty, metal filing cabinets.

The men called out for him – telling him they wanted to know where Woodson was. Barry's mind told him not to trust them. Yet they enticed.

"He set you up!" one shouted. "Tell us where he is, and we'll take it easy on you."

"Face it! There's no way out of this!" yelled the other. "Come out. Let's talk. You're in over your head. We know that. It's that rat Woodson we want. We might even have a job for you."

But talking was not an option, thought Barry. If they wanted to talk, they ruined their opportunity by trying to whack him out.

Up to this point, Barry's life was one of non-violent crimes, but as he gripped the gun he knew that was about to change.

The filing cabinets were not pressed tight against each other.

Through a space he saw the men enter the room, their pistols hip level ready to fire and postures one of old west hired guns on a mission to hunt down the inexperienced person in hiding.

A droplet of sweat rolled down Barry's cheek. His heart raced as he lifted the pistol's business end to the gap between the cabinets. Taking a deep breath, he aimed the pistol at a man – a man he was either going to wound or kill. It was his first time doing such a thing, and the thought of burning in Hell forever slowed him, but the thought of it being the last day of his life pushed away any fears planted in him by a distant church sermon.

Without another thought, Barry pulled the trigger. The gun popped. The man let out a scream as the bullet slammed into his chest.

Barry dropped the pistol and grabbed his ears – a result of the filing cabinets working together to throw the blast sound back into his face.

The other man shocked by the gun fire, slammed his body against a wall and yelled out, "You're gonna die scumbag!"

Barry reached for the gun.

His fears overworking his rational mind gave no pause.

Fight or flight.
Fight or flight.
Fight or fli...
Awe, ugh... Forget psychology!

With a burst of angry energy Barry ran out screaming with the gun blasting a continuous stream of shots.

Each bullet punched into the man with so much force he failed to get off a shot and crashed back against the floor.

Barry watched in horror as the man writhed in agony for a few seconds, his body going through seizure like spasms as it fought to hang onto life.

Outside, Barry heard a siren.

Rushing to a window, he peered down to see two police cars.

Panic gripped him. He turned, and as he did he heard, “Freeze!”

But Barry’s body moved instinctively toward the voice. Big mistake too. As it did, the cop opened fire, nailing Barry in the heart. His body dropped in an awkward, undignified way by crumpling to the side, essentially folding in on itself.

Silence gripped the room, and the cop, who did the shooting, walked slowly to Barry’s body left as nothing but a sweat glazed hunk of meat in a t-shirt and jeans.

“Hey,” said the other cop stepping up, “that’s Barry.”

“Rollo’s kid?”

“Yeah. You just killed a cop’s son.”

THE END

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